

THE SHIP'S MAST. THE LEGACY OF THE MACASSAN PRESENCE IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

A ship's mast with flags attached stands anchored to the ground in a cleared area near the centre of a number of Yolngu (Aboriginal) communities in north-east Arnhem Land. The mast is, I argue, the most significant and enduring legacy of contact with Macassan¹ trepangers from Sulawesi, who ventured onto the northern Australian coast from at least 1700 until the early years of this century. Drawing on Taussig's (1993) text 'Mimesis and Altricity,' and more recently Merlan's (1998) examination of the mimetic quality of the Aboriginal social agenda, I discuss the ways in which lessons from the Arnhem Land mast are of political import for contemporary Arnhem Landers pursuing self-determination. I also examine the proposition that the revelation of sacred Dreaming law by Aborigines, in particular those narratives incorporating representations of non-Aborigines, is a strategy being pursued by Yolngu in order to advance the reconciliation process in Australia.

KEYWORDS: Aboriginal reconciliation, Bayini, Birrinydji, Flag (Bandirra), Macassans, North-east Arnhem Land, Ship's Mast (Marayarr), Walitha'walitha, Warramiri, Yolngu.

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, the spread of Islam followed the seafaring routes taken by Moslem traders from Arabia, Persia and India. As Tjandrasasmita (1978) notes, while their main objective was trade, their next was religious conversion. They would acquire power in an area, recruit religious preachers from amongst local populations, build mosques, and encourage immigration of other Muslims (Melink-Roelofz 1970). Though Islam had been in the East Indies since perhaps as early as the seventh century, it only expanded rapidly in the sixteenth century. Schricke (1957) argues that 'it is... impossible to understand [this rapid expansion]...unless one takes into account the antagonism between the Moslem traders and the Portuguese.' Not only was it a means of providing a united front against the colonizers, the new religion sought to

embrace converts into the faith by synthesising the Islamic creed with existing beliefs. There was no compulsion to abandon older traditions (Turnbull 1989).

From as early as 1511, wealthy Moslem traders were being exiled from Portuguese held territories, and were forced to settle in other centres of faith such as Aceh, Johor, Banten, Ternate, and Macassar, which all became great religious centres and trading ports (McKay 1976). The rise of Macassar, in particular, was a phenomenon unequalled in Indonesian history (Reid 1983). From uncertain origins around 1500, in a little over 100 years, the kingdom had risen to a position of political and economic dominance. The Sultanate of Gowa (Macassar) saw it as a religious duty to bring this new religion to their neighbours, by conquest if need be.

It is therefore not surprising, given the Islamization of South Sulawesi, that today

¹ I use the expression to refer to all Indonesians involved in the trepang industry, as Aborigines do. In reality, the crews of the fishing vessels were drawn not only from the Macassarese from Ujung Pandang (Macassar), but also Bugis and Sama-Bajau or Sea Gypsies, as well as people from islands such as Ambon, Ceram, Irian Jaya and so on.

there is scant evidence of ceremonial mast and flag beliefs and practices comparable to those found in north-east Arnhem Land. In East and West Timor, however, Traube (1986) has recorded narratives which are somewhat similar in that the flagpole is a paramount symbol in discussions pertaining to colonization. For the Mambai of East Timor, for example, the flagpole and flag tell the story of a lost brotherhood or unity between indigenous 'black' Timorese and 'white' Europeans. The return of the young brother in the form of the colonial Portuguese was a mixed blessing for the elder brother (indigenous Timorese), who remained. The flagpole and flag is a metaphor for complimentary governance, describing a division between temporal power (Portuguese flag) and spiritual authority (Timorese pole)². The recorded narratives describe the tension between affirmation of the colonial order and the moral condemnation of Portuguese rulers who disregarded or were ignorant of the real significance of this tradition.

The Arnhem Land mast, from the perspective of members of the Warramiri clan, refers to a Dreaming figure named Birrinydji, rather than to the superstructure of any ocean-going sea craft - including that belonging to the Dreaming being itself.³ The origin of the word Birrinydji is from a term for the colonial Portuguese ('Franks'⁴). For Aborigines, Birrinydji is an 'inside' or sacred expression for Balanda (from 'Hollander', a term commonly used also by Indonesians to refer to the 'white man'). But Birrinydji is also known by Aborigines as Gombaniya (or Compania), which is a Bahasa Indonesian term for the V.O.C. - the Dutch East India Company. The flag is

symbolic of the realm of Walitha'walitha⁵, an Aboriginal Dreaming in the image of Allah - and of the continued life of the deceased Aborigine on a mythical island paradise in the seas to the north of Arnhem Land. The discussion that follows is based on the premise that a Macassan mast and flag ritual complex addressed, in some measure, Indonesian experience with Europeans. Following contact with the trepangers, Australian Aborigines adopted the mast and flag ritual complex in ways relevant to their own situation.

In this paper I ask: In what manner have momentous historical events in Indonesia been interpreted by Macassans, and then upon contact with Aborigines, translated into Arnhem Land cosmology? In reviewing mast and flag beliefs and practices in Arnhem Land, how is Aboriginal contact with trepangers relevant today in Aboriginal interpretations of, and responses to, non-Aboriginal hegemony? And finally, can the revelation of sacred Dreaming narratives, in particular those incorporating Aboriginal representations of non-Aborigines, positively influence the reconciliation process in Australia?

THE YOLNGU AND THE MURNGIN

The people of north-east Arnhem Land are known as Yolngu, but they have also been referred to in the literature as Murngin⁶ and Wulamba. Dualism is the defining feature of the Yolngu universe. Each person is born into a patrimoiety, named Dhuwa or Yirritja, as well as a patrilineal land-owning clan or Mala which again is either Dhuwa or Yirritja. Each member possesses rights to access and

² Referred to as 'The Walk of Rule and Ban' or 'the Walk of the Flag' (Traube 1986: 54).

³ Birrinydji's boat was known as the Matjala and Yinderama.

⁴ A general term for the Portuguese was the 'Franks' (McKay 1976: 98). Variations appear wherever the Portuguese travelled, i.e. Falang, Feringhi or Frinji (Abdurachman 1978: 162); Parrangi in Sulawesi (Reid 1983: 139); and Fo-lang-ki in China (Bayly 1989: 20). It is still used in various parts of the world to refer to Europeans, i.e. Batu Ferringhu, a tourist beach in Penang, Malaysia, while in Maluku, Indonesia, the descendants of the Portuguese are known as 'Orang Feringghi'.

⁵ An Islamic chant - *La ilaha illa'llah*: 'There is no god but God'.

⁶ Murngin or Murrnginy refers to the 'iron-age' of Birrinydji, and the use of this term corresponds with a view in the 1920s that the way of life that Aborigines were then living was directly inspired by this Dreaming (McIntosh 1996b).

use certain lands through their father, who gives a person their clan identity, but they also have specified interests in the land of their mother and their mother's mother.

The geographic focus of this study is the Aboriginal community of Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island), 500 kilometres east of the Northern Territory capital of Darwin. The largest settlement in north-east Arnhem Land, Galiwin'ku was established as a mission in 1942 by the Methodist Church. The community is home to approximately 1500 out of a total Yolngu population of 5000. The traditional Aboriginal owners of the island, the Liyagawumirr, share their homeland with eight other closely related clan groups, whose country lies in the immediate vicinity of the settlement. In this paper attention is focussed on the Yirritja moiety and in particular on one resident clan, the Warramiri, and the views of its ex-leader, the late David Burrumarra M.B.E. From the 1950s through the 1980s, Burrumarra was a leading spokesperson for Elcho Island Aborigines on the history of contact with Macassans, and also on their relations with the Government and the Uniting (previously Methodist) Church.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

Non-Aboriginal academics have written a great deal about the exotic historical episode of contact between Islamic fishermen and Aboriginal hunter-gatherers, but very little about an obvious legacy of that contact - the ship's mast (*marayarr*). Yet on remote beaches and isolated headlands, in the middle of bustling settlements, in cemeteries or at places where Yirritja moiety Birrinydji ceremonies have been held, one will notice tall bamboo poles with strips of cloth (*bandirra*) attached. In the major communities of north-east Arnhem Land one also encounters a variation on this theme - a replica of a ship's mast - a flagpole - complete with elaborately decorated hand-painted flags. Both items of material culture (bamboo pole and mast) refer to the Wangarr or Dreaming entities Birrinydji and Walithaifwalitha. The pole and flag is

associated with funerary rites, and at the cemetery at Galiwin'ku there are perhaps a hundred in various stages of dilapidation. The mast is usually located upon graves of Yirritja moiety Warramiri, Dhalwangu or Gumatj clan leaders, but more commonly at places where these influential indigenous leaders sat to deliberate the politics of the day. The ship's mast stands at least three meters high and is painted with distinctive black, white, yellow and red triangles, associating it with the Yirritja moiety. At Galiwin'ku, the Warramiri mast is located where the late Warramiri leader Nyambi once lived⁷. The Gumatj mast is located alongside the grave of a deceased Gumatj leader (McIntosh 1996b).

In the ethnographic record, an interpretation of the significance of the ship's mast (and pole) recorded by the anthropologist Lloyd Warner in the 1920s has been repeated verbatim by scholars over the years. The mast and flag, it is reported, symbolizes the departure of the soul of a deceased Aborigine, who is to sail away to the mythical land of the dead, just as the Macassan prau would depart for Macassar at the end of each trepanning season (Warner 1969). As already hinted, my contention is that it is a vastly more complex story.

For Aborigines, Macassan trepanners were the first people with whom they had prolonged contact. For Macassans, the trip was a business venture. Arnhem Land, or Marege as they called it, was the farthest coast, and one of the more lucrative of the fishermen's sojourns at sea. All along north-east Arnhem Land beaches are traces of the presence of these Asian traders: stone lines that once supported cooking pots; fragments of pottery and glass; and tamarind trees, which were place markers for the seasonal travellers.

Despite many recorded episodes of violence and bloodshed, north-east Arnhem Landers today view the heroic times of trade and travel to and from Macassar aboard sailing vessels as a golden era. Macassan seafarers were a hardy lot and it was the greatest of all adventures for a young Aborigine to embark upon the voyage to

⁷ Nyambi was David Burrumarra's older brother.

Sulawesi.⁸ But the industry is remembered for other reasons as well as I will detail throughout this paper. In a vision of the past inspired by myth, the Macassans came at the tail-end of a series of foreign visitations, each less friendly or cooperative than the last. Differences in the visitor's skin coloration from black in the earliest stories, to white in the most recent, marked the various mythical waves of newcomers - a point I will return to later. These contact narratives address fundamental questions: Were the visitors related to the Aborigines, and did they adhere to the principles of Aboriginal law (were their patterns of behaviour predictable)? Who provided these intrepid travellers with a mandate to embark each year on a voyage on the north-east trade winds? Why did Arnhem Land give up its wealth to these outsiders? For Aborigines in north-east Arnhem Land, it was the Yirritja moiety or half of society who had the answers. Ownership of the ship's mast by certain groups signified pre-eminence in this regard.

Taussig (1993), in his text, *Mimesis and Alterity*, speaks of the 'magical power of replication, the image affected by what it is an image of, wherein the representation shares in or takes power from the represented.' In terms of the narratives pertaining to the ship's mast, we have a representation⁹ of Aborigines as being *au fait* with sacred laws considered to underpin non-Aboriginal wealth and influence. The Dreaming figure Birrinydji, embodying the wealth and status of non-Aborigines (and guided by Walitha'walitha or Allah), sanctioned the emerging relations between Aborigines and newcomers, including Europeans. Birrinydji would 'bring the Aborigines up-to-date', one Aboriginal leader advised, 'but over time things went

wrong'. Addiction to the products of trade engendered bitterness and relegated Aborigines to a position of dependency - their rightful status as land owners was threatened - until Walitha'walitha intervened.¹⁰ So in one symbolic complex there are references to an unchanging Dreaming from which power may be ritually drawn, images of dependency upon and domination by outsiders, and redemption through belief in an All-Being held in common with outsiders (McIntosh 1996b).

The extent to which this Dreaming narrative remains of relevance in the intercultural arena is best understood in the light of Merlan's (1998) discussion of continuity and change from a southern Arnhem Land perspective. Merlan (1998) argues that the shift in Government policy towards Aborigines from one of assimilation to self-determination, from the imposition upon Aborigines of alien values to seeking to elicit from them fixed ideas concerning 'tradition', has engendered imitation or mimesis on the part of the present generation. In short, Merlan says that representations of Aborigines made most powerfully by non-Aborigines have come to affect who and what Aborigines consider themselves to be. But does not the reverse also apply? Can the revelation by Aborigines of sacred narratives which incorporate representations of non-Aborigines (as in the myths of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha) be considered a strategy for positively influencing the course of intercultural relations in the Aborigines favour?

In the 1980s, early on in the age of consultation, Victoria River Aborigines believed that by telling the world about their complex history of representations of non-Aborigines as immoral and imperialistic (as being in the image of a mythical 'Captain

⁸ Aborigines are now retracing by plane the voyage to Macassar, and some of them hope to make contact with long lost relatives.

⁹ Really a representation of a representation.

¹⁰ This corresponds with an 'outside' or 'historical' view of contact in the Cape Wilberforce area of north-east Arnhem Land. In the last stages of the trepang industry, deteriorating relations between certain clans, such as the Warramiri, and Macassans, led to bloodshed. The 'inside' story described here provides a Dreaming 'blueprint' for this and also the consequent departure of Macassans in 1907. However in the 'inside' narrative, it is an earlier wave of visitors, the Bayini, who depart. See later in this paper.

Cook'), non-Aborigines would learn that they were morally bound to live up to an ideal envisioned in the Dreaming narratives (Rose 1992). Similarly, in north-east Arnhem Land, followers of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha anticipated a time to come when non-Aborigines would understand the full significance of 'traditional' Aboriginal belief and learn to live by the precepts of Aboriginal law. From a Warramiri standpoint, lessons from the mast and flag permeate discussions about human rights and a proposed treaty between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, for they speak to a deeply held belief in what some elders referred to as 'membership and remembrance.' Non-Aborigines could never totally dominate Aborigines because 'white' and 'black' were united (members) in a belief in God - symbolized by the flag. If there was to be reconciliation in Australia, non-Aborigines would have to acknowledge (or remember) that their power and influence over Aborigines came from an Aboriginal Dreaming - that symbolized by the mast.

BIRRINYDJI AND WALITHA'WALITHA

All that is known of the Birrinydji Dreaming has been passed down to the present through many hands and interpretive processes. A Warramiri leader named Bukulatjpi who lived in the mid-1800s is credited by contemporary Warramiri leaders with 'uncovering the truth' about Birrinydji and the Macassans. In many parts of Australia the first settlers were deemed to be ancestors returned from the dead, their light skin colour being evidence of the bodily decay that takes place in the weeks following a death. Bukulatjpi, living on remote Cape Wilberforce in the mid-1800s, understood that Macassans were not Yolngu or in any way divine. Rather, their inordinate material wealth and willingness to share this with Aborigines in exchange for labour was having a major impact on Warramiri lifeways. The first impulse, Burrumarra said (recalling Bukulatjpi's words), was for the Yolngu to send these newcomers away. But then he thought to himself - maybe these are

the same people who had come much, much earlier - as so many of the myths detail. The trepanger's possession of modern technology was equated with their being recipients of Birrinydji's bounty. Bukulatjpi therefore reasoned that something had gone wrong at the 'beginning of time' for Birrinydji was an Aboriginal Dreaming and his material wealth was the right of clans such as the Warramiri, so long as his many rituals were performed. But it was the Macassans who performed these sacred dances on the beaches of Arnhem Land. Yolngu had long 'forgotten' them.

Just as a totem represents the outward form of a Dreaming being, a Macassan *bunggawa* (boat captain) by the name of Luki provides a visual image of what Birrinydji is supposed to be like. Otherwise, Birrinydji is indistinguishable from other Dreaming figures. Sacred objects or *rangga*, like the mast and flag, are the basis of extensive clan alliances within the Yirritja moiety. Numerous totemic species also owe their form to Birrinydji's intervention: the sword fish, the fish with sails like a boat, and the bird with a tail like a metal axe, signify to members of Yirritja clans such as the Warramiri the continuing relevance of his laws.

Bukulatjpi viewed Birrinydji as a Dreaming figure that controlled the seasonal movement of the Macassan trading fleet and also the winds that would bring the visitors onto the coast each November. Birrinydji had also provided the earlier waves of visiting fishermen with the skill to fashion swords from coastal haematite outcrops, pottery from local antbed, and to grow rice and other plants foods in Warramiri billabongs. But Birrinydji did not act alone. Bukulatjpi understood that he was answerable to a higher Dreaming authority - Walitha'walitha or Allah.

Birrinydji and his wife Bayini were described as ancestors of Warramiri Yolngu - creational figures that emerged from the Australian mainland at a point beyond memory. Birrinydji ordained that certain non-Aborigines would come to Arnhem Land 'to make the land and the people strong' and introduce to them the technology

and ideas of the modern world. First there were mysterious black whale hunters from the mythical islands of Badu to the north-east of Galiwin'ku; then mythical golden-brown workers for Birrinydji, known by the term 'Bayini'; then historical light brown Macassans from the north-west; and finally white Japanese pearlers in the 1920s and European colonists. The colour change in the visitors in this constructed history from black to white corresponds with a change in attitude towards reciprocity in dealings with Aborigines, and therefore knowledge or ignorance of Birrinydji's law.

In the first wave Aborigines and whale hunters were united in the laws of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha through the whale, an outside symbol for these Dreamings. Together, Aborigines and whale hunters upheld the law of the sea (McIntosh 1996b). The alliance between the two was such that the souls of the Aboriginal dead from the Yirritja moiety went on the backs of whales to the land of the dead, guided by these hunters. The 'Bayini', on the other hand, after introducing the laws of Birrinydji to the Yolngu, kept the secrets of iron-making and weaving to themselves when they departed (McIntosh 1995a). From a Warramiri perspective, certain Macassan leaders recognized the law of Birrinydji and respected Aboriginal sovereignty, but most did not and there was great disparity in wealth between the visitors and land owners. Finally, Japanese and Europeans totally ignored Aboriginal rights and there was little or no reciprocity in relationships - a situation that persists until the present, in Burrumarra's view.

By far the most significant of these supposed 'waves' of contact was the 'Bayini', the bringers of Birrinydji's laws to Aborigines (McIntosh 1995a). During this period, the Warramiri homeland of Dholtji is claimed to have become a centre for iron manufacture, boat building, and rice, clothing and pottery production - a 'Mecca' according to one Warramiri leader. When Aborigines and the 'Bayini' were united, they both prospered, but over time relations soured. 'Warramiri Aborigines desired only good, but bad came too,' Burrumarra said. A 'fire came to the Yolngu' and 'there was

great bitterness between white and black'. The spirit of the dead or 'Wurramu' took over Yolngu lives. Birrinydji wanted to bring more non-Aboriginal people to Arnhem Land but Walitha'walitha sent Birrinydji and the newcomers away, for Walitha'walitha could see how the Yolngu were suffering. Jealousy and greed was tearing away at the population, and Aboriginal addiction to tobacco and alcohol provoked inter-clan feuding, threatening their survival. So the 'Bayini' left the Australian mainland before their work of teaching was completed, and their parting words to the Aborigines 'From now on you must look after yourself' (pers.comm. Timothy Buthimang 1988) was the signal for the beginning of an era of impoverishment for Aborigines. The maintenance of the status quo (reciprocity and respect in intercultural dealings between Aborigines and non-Aborigines) required ceremonial input from both blacks and whites, but as Burrumarra said, 'Birrinydji did not want to stay in Australia, but he left the Wurramu and Walitha'walitha here.' Birrinydji and Bayini's legacy in Arnhem Land is the continuing unpleasant consequences of contact, and ideas of the good life and salvation in Allah or God (McIntosh 1996a).

THE CHANGING DREAMING

All clans in north-east Arnhem Land are responsible for a specific aspect or interpretation of the moiety narrative, and the operation of the moiety depends, to a degree, on the clans working in harmony. Dreaming tracks or songlines cover more than the territory of a single clan, and each group is responsible for maintaining their part of the law. In the case of Birrinydji, the same applies, and responsibility for ritual performance was shared between three Yirritja moiety clans (Warramiri, Dhalwangu and Gumatji), but in a Warramiri perspective, it spread beyond the confines of the Australian mainland to seafaring groups from the islands of eastern Indonesia and elsewhere.

In sacred ceremonies, Aboriginal leaders recreate events from the Dreaming in a way reminiscent of how they were first

experienced. The symbol of a deity (in our case Birrinydji's mast), is positioned on ritual ground so as to attract and hold the spiritual force of the Dreaming, while actors play out the parts of the drama accompanied by the sounds of the *didjeridu* (drone pipe), *bilma* (clapsticks) and a *manikay* (song). When the ritual conditions are satisfied, the deity may bestow its power or meaning to participants through the leader. In the days of Macassan trepanging, the Birrinydji ritual would be performed upon receipt of trade goods. According to Warramiri clan elder David Burrumarra, the gift acknowledged that Balanda and Yolngu were 'one' through Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha, and that the visitors wished to bring 'honour' to the land and its traditional owners.

In these pre-colonial times, and during the early decades of this century, Yolngu religion and politics were inextricably inter-twined. The Warramiri, for example, had aspirations that members of their clan would acquire mobility, talent and worldly status as followers of Birrinydji. This Dreaming represented the wealth that comes from the earth. Aboriginal earth, assets to which non-Aborigines alone now appeared to have access to. However, as a result of prolonged contact with outsiders, non-rational modes of thought have now come to play much less of a role in the political process. Since the advent of the mission at Galiwin'ku in the 1940s, the Aboriginal *Weltanschauung* has been subjected to a process of rationalization, and a new generation of Warramiri has been forced to re-think many traditional concepts. The meaning of myth and ritual is drastically changing (Kölig 1989). In some cases, the Dreaming no longer provides the eternal, immutable blueprint for the world and human existence. Some younger Aborigines do not believe, for example, that in performing a rite they will achieve a particular outcome. The Dreaming, for many, has become a reservoir of political symbolism, but not instrumentality. The Birrinydji ritual, for instance, rather than being a pre-condition for reciprocity in dealings with the other,

expresses an entitlement to land in the face of non-Aboriginal encroachment. Aborigines need to remind themselves, as well as others, of their privileged position in relation to 'country'.¹¹

The history of race relations in Arnhem Land has been such that many Yolngu feel resentment towards Balanda and the performance of the Birrinydji ritual provides an avenue for the expression of defiance. Yirritja moiety, Dhalwangu and Gumatj clan members treasure their detailed knowledge of Birrinydji's songs and ceremonies, and carefully maintain sacred Birrinydji sites, but in the late 1980s community leaders were not able or willing to speak about the related narrative. The Birrinydji Dreaming had become all but a mythless rite. The Warramiri, however, being advocates of a reconciliation with Balanda, had elaborate stories concerning Birrinydji, but were cautious about revealing them. Whites might come to believe that the Dreaming condoned perceived present-day discriminatory practices, I was informed.

THE MAST AND FLAG

Belief in the ancient nature of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha (or at least how it is presumed to pre-date the arrival in Arnhem Land of Macassans) is supported by the widespread incidence of items of material culture and terminology associated with them. While it is not possible to say that there has ever been any large scale uniformity of belief in Birrinydji, there is evidence to suggest that from the 1920s through to the 1940s, first contact and colonization was contemplated by members of both Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties in terms of this Dreaming.

Not long after the end of the Macassan era, Aboriginal oral historical accounts described how the Macassan prayer-man would climb the mast and chant for Allah - the most High God - prior to the journey home to Indonesia (Berndt and Berndt 1954). Other records indicated that when a mast of a Macassan boat had broken or a member of the crew was about to die, a

¹¹ An expression that refers both to the land and the sea.

ceremony involving the mast would be performed. It is implied by anthropologists and historians that Aborigines adopted this ceremony as their own and, in the process, attached additional meanings to its performance relevant only to themselves. In the 1920s Warner, for example, witnessed the way in which Yirritja clan members would pick up a dead body during a funeral and move it up and down as if they were lifting the mast, while others danced as if pulling on the rigging in order to raise the sails. (Today certain Yirritja Yolngu lift the coffin in a similar fashion). They would then sing for Allah (Walitha'walitha), describing the song as a Macassar prayer, and ask for unspecified blessings from this 'man-god in the moon' (Warner 1969). Warner chronicled how this mast ceremony facilitated the passage of the soul of a deceased Yirritja Aborigine to an unknown land of plenty to the north. The soul was to sail away just as the Macassar prau used to do.

All Yolngu have some memory of Macassans through stories passed down from generation to generation, but it was only David Burrumarra, according to his brothers, who could speak the truth of this past as it was known from the 'inside'. Men in their seventies, even they deferred to Burrumarra's interpretations. This was because the Warramiri consider themselves to be the primary custodians of Birrinydji, and according to their tradition, Birrinydji speaks to Yolngu through the leader of this clan (mimicking in some sense the order of command aboard a Macassan prau).

Warramiri oral history details the gift in 1907 of a mast and flag to the Warramiri leader Ganimbirngu by the Macassan Daeng Rangka, the last trepanger to visit the Arnhem Land coast (McIntosh 1994). For Yolngu this was interpreted as the re-enactment of a Dreaming incident whereby the ancestral being Birrinydji planted his flag at Dholtji at the 'beginning of time.' Daeng Rangka's mast was to replace an old decaying mast at the Warramiri homeland, which itself was a replica of a large metal pole which had stood on that same site in

Birrinydji's day. Described as being like a chimney associated with iron smelting, the mast stood for Birrinydji's law or the new world order imposed on Aborigines following first contact - an order that 'turned the Aboriginal world upside down' (McIntosh 1996b).

Statements by Burrumarra and other Yolngu elders such as, 'the mast and flag is the way the law is carried,' suggests that the mast was placed on Arnhem Land shores in a way reminiscent of the English hoisting the Union Jack in 1788, but it is not straightforward. Burrumarra said that Macassans visiting Arnhem Land shores recognized the old mast and flag at Dholtji, which had then been in Warramiri possession for countless generations, and knew that Aborigines were the custodians of laws that had united them at some point in the distant past, as in the East Timorese narratives¹². Aborigines and the visitors from Sulawesi were 'one' through Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha, just as Christianity was now seen to unite Yolngu and Balanda.

A DEFIANT DEITY

When anthropologists Lloyd Warner and the Berndts encountered Birrinydji ceremonies in the first half of this century, they witnessed, in the bodily movements of performers, a powerful demonstration of Aboriginal authority as owners of land. When Aborigines recreate the planting of the mast and assert Birrinydji's dominion over the land, they swirl Birrinydji's swords overhead, and do a quick-step as if propelling Birrinydji's boat through a torrid sea. As Burrumarra advised, the purpose of the ceremony is to 'show the Yolngu', that is, to make it apparent that the Yolngu have an important ceremonial role to play in maintaining a law from which ostensibly whites also draw their power.

In the 1940s the Berndts recorded 150 garma, public or 'outside' songs pertaining to Macassan influences - including the mast ceremonial (Berndt and Berndt 1954). By

¹² In Mambai oral tradition, the flagpole and flag inspire 'fear and trembling' amongst Timorese (i.e. obedience to the law) and ascribe to the Mambai the powers of a legitimate sovereign.

the late 1980s however, these same songs were regarded as 'inside' or sacred. Yolngu at Galiwin'ku were now openly practicing Christianity, and there were conflicts between the two beliefs. Statements by Yolngu leaders such as 'The followers of Birrinydji should be Christians', or, 'We are Murrnginy, we believe in God,' or 'Walitha'walitha is one and the same as the Christian God,' are indicative of the transformation that was taking place. From the 1950s onwards, Burrumarra said there was a conscious effort to restrict and change what was known of the Warramiri and Yirritja past. The old ways were 'too hard, too far, and too difficult to explain' to the younger generation. The view of Yirritja moiety Aboriginal leaders was that there was great similarity between Walitha'walitha and the Christian God and there was a possibility of confusion, so they openly promoted the latter and hid the former. Birrinydji, however, could not so easily be set aside. His influence was now seen to encompass all places affected by European colonialism.

Burrumarra believed that the establishment of the Methodist (Uniting) Christian mission at Galiwin'ku was Birrinydji's plan for Yolngu. They would become Christians and Birrinydji could 'put down his swords.' In other words, there would be peace and harmony as Aborigines reaped the benefits of the Dreaming. This was not to be of course, but the dream did not fade. Burrumarra re-evaluated his strategy and in the 1980s decided to make public many of the myths of Birrinydji as part of a reconciliation proposal to the federal government (McIntosh 1995a). Other Yolngu followed Burrumarra's lead and Birrinydji soon became a rallying point for pan-Yolngu resistance to non-Aboriginal hegemony. Former 'Australian of the Year,' Gumatj spokesperson and lead singer of the rock group Yothu Yindi, Mandawuy Yunupingu, used Birrinydji dances in songs about maintaining one's Yolngu identity while 'living in the mainstream'; Terry Yumbulul of Warramiri clan stirred Yolngu to unite and demand their rights to the sea by invoking the memory of this Dreaming (McIntosh 1995b). And at Gurrumurru, Dhalwangu leaders were given approval by

the Warramiri to use the image of Birrinydji on the community school flag during that period when the local education system was being 'Aboriginalized'.

MEMBERSHIP AND REMEMBERSHIP

Following a widescale conversion to Christianity after the departure of missionaries in 1974, Yolngu were inspired to reposition major Dreamings in a broader universe - a universe that included non-Aborigines (McIntosh 1997). Major moiety Dreamings were henceforth referred to as prophets, in an old testament sense. Walitha'walitha was spoken of as an 'angel of God'. This repositioning was known by people such as David Burrumarra as 'membership-and-remembership'. In a vision of the world united by Jesus, each social unit within the whole represents a self-governing entity. Through Christianity, Yolngu and Balanda are united in a larger system of belief which sees all Australians as being members of a single family. While Walitha'walitha and Christian beliefs are interpreted in relation to one another, their significance for Yolngu is seen separately, at different levels of membership, i.e. Christianity is for all people, Walitha'walitha is for Macassans and Yolngu, Birrinydji is for the Yirritja moiety and Macassans, and the whale is a Warramiri totem etc. But membership-and-remembership is more than this. It refers to the interplay of 'inside' and 'outside' and mythical and historical narratives. Yolngu may be dominated by non-Aborigines as a consequence of history, but they 'remember' Walitha'walitha. They may be united with non-Aborigines through a belief in God, but they also 'remember' that Birrinydji is an Aboriginal Dreaming and that the wealth of non-Aborigines comes from Aboriginal land.

There is no single word in the Warramiri or other Yolngu languages that translates as membership-and-remembership, and indeed it is not easily translatable into English. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber (1949), however, proposes a similar outlook to membership-and-remembership in his essay, *In the midst of crisis*. He describes a

community as a circle with a clearly defined centre. Members have a common relation to this centre which overrides all other relations. The community, i.e. the circle, is described by the radii, and not by the points along its circumference. The common centre must be something concrete, like a sacred text such as the Torah, a person (like Jesus Christ), or a set of rituals (as in Confucianism). As people see, study, and come to understand the centre, they become aware of the divine, and their attention is turned outward to the world around them, to larger levels of membership, where their work lies, for it is beyond this circle or community that the authority and authenticity of the centre is proven.

In north-east Arnhem Land, many Yolngu still look to the Dreaming as the sacred centre of their community, and in a perspective based on membership-and-remembership, they consider their emerging roles and responsibilities in a world lying well beyond their homelands. The fact that Birrinydji takes the form of a white man is evidence of membership-and-remembership. His symbol, the mast, signals 'remembership' of long ago, of the perceived partnership between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, and also Aboriginal 'membership' in belief in this law. The flag on the other hand, in Burrumarra's words, represents the heavenly dimension, and the idea that all people are, or will be, united. A legacy of contact between Aborigines and Macassans and spoken of in terms of honor, the ship's mast and flag stands for the law of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha, which Macassans, Japanese and Europeans ignored or 'forgot.'

When Birrinydji left the country, with him went the affluence that only non-Aborigines now possess. Aborigines have the songs and the stories of Birrinydji, sites in the landscape, and a memory of a grand and noble past. In Burrumarra's words, the Yolngu now have 'plenty but nothing.' Because of Birrinydji, the earth is a place of struggle, and Dreaming narratives inspire followers of the law to pursue the earthly paradise to come. The mast and flag therefore speak to a deeply held belief by the

Warramiri that non-Aborigines can never totally dominate Aborigines because white and black people are united (members) in their belief in God. Following Burrumarra's lead, lessons from the 'inside' and 'outside' pertaining to the mast permeated discussions about human rights and the treaty in the early 1990s. In Burrumarra's view, if there is to be reconciliation in Australia, non-Aborigines must acknowledge (or remember) that their power and influence over Aborigines comes from an Aboriginal Dreaming. Alternatively, there needs to be recognition of the privileged place of Aborigines in relation to the land and sea. The recognition by the Federal Government of Aboriginal Native Title land and sea rights, and contemplation of the design for an Australian flag which incorporates Aboriginal motifs, means we are closer now to such a reality than ever before. The achievement of reconciliation, still to come, will be viewed by senior Warramiri as a testimony to the truth and continuing relevance of the Birrinydji Dreaming.

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